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The sublime is simply defined by Edmund Burke as, “awe mixed with terror.” The sublime evokes emotions which are in reality unpleasant or frightening, but when experienced from a distance, for example in a painting, can be thrilling and entertaining. In the world of visual art, the sublime is often depicted in such natural phenomenon as mountainous landscapes and seascapes. The sublime is more clearly explained through the writings of Kant and Cole as well as the American landscape paintings of the Hudson River School artists.

According to Kant, the sublime names experiences, which seem to overwhelm the viewer. One would expect the feeling of being overwhelmed to be accompanied by fear; however, the sublime can also be a pleasurable experience. He defines the sublime as a kind of “rapid alternation” between the fear of overwhelming and the pleasure of seeing that overwhelming besieged. The sublime presents some interesting points, which seem to challenge Kant: the sublime may be formless; the sublime appears to be “counter-purposive”; and the sublime involves both pain and pleasure.

Kant divides the sublime into the mathematical and the dynamical. The mathematically sublime is concerned with things that have magnitude in and of

themselves, something that is “absolutely large.” Kant says, “But in a judgment by which we describe something as absolutely large, we do not just mean that the object has some magnitude, but we also imply that this magnitude is superior to that of many other objects of the same kind, yet without indicating this superiority determinately ” (Kant 104). This magnitude that follows the sublime, “...must not be sought in things of nature, but must be sought solely in our ideas” (Kant 105). The dynamically sublime are things that have magnitude of force in relation to us, particularly our will. In this case, a might or power is observed in nature, which is fearful but is not an object of fear.

Kant’s concept of the sublime can be seen in the landscapes of America’s first native school of painting, which was known as the Hudson River School. It was given this name because in the beginning its member drew their subjects primarily from the “uncultivated regions” of the Hudson River Valley. “The Hudson River School artists not only presented Romantic panoramic landscape views but also participated in the ongoing exploration of the individual’s and the country’s relationship to the land” (Gardner 878). These painters had two main focuses in their paintings: the unique qualities of America and the moral question of the direction of America as a civilization.

Thomas Cole was the founder of the Hudson River School, a “master of the sublime,” and the author of an “Essay on American Scenery,” which emphasized his love for nature and his country’ scenery. Cole says, “...he is still in the midst of American scenery-it is his own land; its beauty, its magnificence, its sublimity-are all his” (Cole 1). He speaks of his love for the mountains, the

forests, the water, and the sky of America. He compared “primitive” America to “industrialized” Europe. According to Cole, “...in civilized Europe the primitive feature of scenery have long since been destroyed or modified” (Cole 4).

America seems to be headed toward the same destiny if they do not take action to prevent the desecration the natural wilderness. He painted the American landscape to not only to capture the combination of the beautiful and the sublime that our great nation has to offer but also to make the Americans ponder about the future of our natural scenery and what it has to offer.

Thomas Cole presented the public with the moral question of the direction of America as a civilization in his painting titled “The Oxbow,” completed in 1836. In this work the viewer sees a view from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a thunderstorm. The lazy oxbow turning of the Connecticut River dominates the painting and is seen as a, “symbol of control over raw nature” (Hughes 146). The composition is divided essentially down the middle, with the sublime on the left and the beautiful on the right.

On the left dark clouds are seen, where the end of a thunderstorm is blowing out of the landscape. A blasted tree is also seen in the left foreground, perhaps to represent any damage due to the thunderstorm. In between the two sides of the work, the viewer can scarcely make out the artist wearing a top hat and turning to the viewers, “...as if to ask for their input in deciding the country’s future course” (Gardner 878). A more developed civilization is seen on the right side of the work. Flat cultivated land is seen in the foreground and sailboats move about in the river. Man has taken over this half of the landscape, cutting

down trees and clearing the land. In his essay, Cole said, "Yet I cannot express my sorrow that the beauty of such landscapes is quickly passing away--the ravages of the axe are daily increasing" (Cole 9). The idea of manifest destiny is also seen in this work as one can make out letters on Hebrew spelling out Yahweh on the mountain located in the center of the work. The Americans believed that it was their God given right to travel across and settle the new World.

Frederic Church whose works are, "...firmly enriched in the idiom of the Romantic sublime" (Gardner 879) has also been associated with the Hudson River School. His painting titled "Twilight in the Wilderness" presents an awe-inspiring panoramic view of the sun setting over the majestic landscape. This painting was created in 1860, during a time of great upheaval, the Civil War. Oddly enough, this painting not only does not include turmoil or conflict, but also excludes any trace of human life. "Its elements, such as the primrose yellow horizon sky, the purple mountains under it, the contorted bare trees, and the cadmium-red afterglow on the fretted, phantasmagoric clouds whose reflection turns the lake to blood , are "natural" and, as it were, verifiable" (Hughes 163-164).

This painting shows, "the eve of something – landscape as portent." "Twilight in the Wilderness" was painted directly before the beginning of the Civil War and seems to demonstrate his underlying feelings about the war. He seems to have sided with the Union as one can almost make out an American Flag in the sky. The tree trunk on the far left serves as a pole and the red stripes and

blue stars are seen in the sky. This sublime landscape frightens the viewer of what is to come in the near future involving the war. Afterwards landscape such as this may be destroyed and loved ones may not be able to admire another beautiful sunset such as the one seen here.

The sublime is clearly explained through the writings of Kant and Cole as well as the landscape paintings of the artists of the Hudson River School. Paintings by such artists as Cole and Church make a visual for these detailed writings. By studying these writings and paintings, one can better grasp the concept of the sublime and its effects on American landscape paintings of the nineteenth century.